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The Völkisch Modernist Beginnings of National Socialism: Its Intrusion into the Church and Its Antisemitic Consequence

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Abstract

The main thesis of this paper is that Nazi religiosity has its origins in the pagan phenomenon called the völkisch movement. This movement consisted of uncountable religious-cum-political groups called Bünde whose leaders and followers were closely interconnected with one another and with the developing Nazi Party. From there völkisch thought penetrated the German Protestant Church and found followers among some Catholics. Given this development, an obvious question follows, namely, can National Socialism be blamed on Christianity and is Christian anti-Judaism the ultimate source of the Holocaust?

Introduction

According to Griffin (2007), Europe was jaded between the two world wars. Its artists and writers were obsessed with degeneration and the wish for transcendence by purging civilization of its decadence. As these modernist thinkers saw it, history itself could be changed by radical human intervention in the form of a suitably instrumentalized Social Darwinism that would above all else redeem the nation. Thus rebirth myths, or palingenesis, expressed a longing for a cultural, social and political transformation and the 'emergence of a new breed of human beings' defined not in terms of 'universal categories but essentially mythic national and racial ones' (Griffin 2007, p. 6).

The mood was one of *Aufbruch* (breaking up and out) and it is this *Aufbruch* that Griffin's theory of the two fascisms (Italian and German) in the desperate interwar years captures (Griffin 2007, p. 9). In this paper, it is argued that the modernism that Griffin describes so eloquently took place in Germany, as Hitler observed, within the context of the völkisch milieu (Scholder 2000, pp. 112–30).

Many writers deny the importance of the völkisch by misreading Hitler's negative comments about völkisch movements made in the context of his attack on political rivals at the end of book one of *Mein Kampf* (Hitler

1943, pp. 359–63; cf. Hitler 1940, pp. 394–400). This overlooks Hitler's clear acknowledgement of the importance of the *völkisch* milieu in mobilizing support for the party found at the beginning of book two. He writes, 'I should like to give a clarification of the concept of "folkish," as well as its relation to the party movement' (Hitler 1943, p. 379; cf. Hitler 1940, p. 415). Then, after a long discussion of the issue, he concludes as follows:

Actually we find hardly a one of our newer political formations which does not base itself in one way or another on this world view . . . *Hence an instrument must be created for the folkish world view which enables it to fight . . .* This is the goal pursued by the National Socialist German Workers' Party. (Hitler 1943, p. 384; cf. Hitler 1940, p. 424)

In this paper, we focus on the way *völkisch* ideas and groups, obsessed with the notion of national renewal, mobilized resources that attracted highly motivated followers dedicated to the world transforming vision of National Socialism.¹ In the process, a religiosity emerged that was rigidly opposed to the Judeo-Christian tradition on which the degeneration of civilization was blamed, marking its bearers the enemies of the true German. The paper is restricted primarily to the years between 1919 and 1936. Of these, 1933–1936 mark the ruthless Nazi party takeover of the *völkisch* milieu, which loses its groups to the various formations of a tyrannous Party and State.

The paper has three sections followed by a conclusion. The first section provides some definitions and clarifications. The second section describes the motivation and organization of a diverse range of religious-cum-political groups (*Bünde*) that were part of the *völkisch* movement, which created an overall *völkisch* cultic milieu wherein National Socialism flourished. The third section shows the penetration of these *völkisch* ideas into the German Protestant Church as well as its effect on some Catholics.

Definitions and Clarification

THE CULTIC MILIEU

Following Colin Campbell (2002, p. 14), a 'cultic milieu can be regarded as the cultural underground of society'. As such it is broadly based with deep historical roots that include 'all deviant belief systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religions, deviant medicine' and so on (p. 14). Importantly, 'This heterogeneous assortment of cultural items can be regarded despite its apparent diversity as constituting a single entity', which 'is manifestly united by a common ideology of seekership' (Campbell 2002, p. 15). Campbell's description fits the German *völkisch* movement extraordinarily well.

CULT FORMATIONS

Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge enrich our understanding of the way cultic milieus congeal into cult movements through their analysis of cult formations. Rejecting the view that all 'cults' share essentially the same characteristics, they posit three distinct types of cult formation. First, there are audience cults that lack formal organization. They spread ideas through lectures, magazines and books. Second, Stark and Bainbridge describe client cults whose individual leaders offer specific services or magical solutions to solve specific problems for discrete individuals (cf. Hesemann 2004). Finally, there are cult movements that develop as clearly identified groups or new religions with distinct followers and/or members (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, pp. 26–30 and 208–13). For example, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer's German Faith Movement and Mathilde Ludendorff's German Knowledge of God Movement, among others discussed later, were both audience cults and movements on the way to becoming new religions when they were stopped. What English-speaking sociologists analysed as cult-like milieus, audiences, clients or movements was called *völkisch* during the 1920s.

VÖLKISCH THOUGHT

The national aspect of German interwar 'cultic' religiosity is captured by the concept *völkisch*. It refers to the sense of being grasped by the reality of the nation as an 'objective category' involving common descent, history and culture, thus creating a 'racially' uniform community called *Volksgemeinschaft* (Herbert 1996: 58). Here nation is the concrete spiritual mediator between providence and individual. *Völkisch* is the adjective derived from *Volk*.² It has to do with religious yearnings that emerge, as it were, from a people and is specific to them.

Within this *völkisch* milieu, academics were busy turning Icelandic sagas (like the Edda) into an alternative religion that was given respectability by linking it to German mysticism, German idealism, and the non-Christian religious perspectives of German classical writers like Goethe, indeed, all heretics through the centuries (Poewe 2006).³ Importantly, the *völkisch* meaning of *Volk* and *Volksgemeinschaft* were common to both the *völkisch* movement and the Nazi party. Campbell describes this as an 'overlapping communication structure' (Campbell 2002, p. 15). It conjoined German faith with faith in Hitler and sanctified not only the political consequences of Nazism but also its notion of providential war. In sum, this definition assumes the fusion or symbiosis of religion and politics, religion and nation, biology and spirit, as well as tragedy and heroism.⁴

VÖLKISCH FAITH

Five things were essential to the religiosity, or faith, found in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s, namely providence (*Vorsehung*), determination

(*Bestimmung*), destiny (*Schicksal*), nation and faith. If we work these völkisch categories into a definition, then völkisch religiosity was an attitude (*Haltung*) of assent (faith) to an infinite power called providence,⁵ which through its dispensatory power determines the destiny of a nation from which there can be no escape.

Thus, Rainer Bucher (2008, p. 77) points out that the main category of Hitler's historical theology is providence.⁶ Hitler integrates his own project into a providential plan of history. In a speech to his party comrades in München 30 October 1923 Hitler drew direct political implications from his concrete theology when he said about democratic politicians, 'none' of them 'are ordained (decreed to act) from a higher providence', all of them are mere 'products of parliamentary expediency' (Bucher 2008, p. 78).

THE MYTHIC DIMENSION

Another essential element in need of attention is the role of myth that incorporates epics and sagas. Myth may be defined as '*a story with culturally formative power*' (Hexham & Poewe 1997, pp. 81–4). By including myths in the definition of völkisch religiosity, one can say that the völkisch milieu sat on experiences and experiential knowledge which fused the personal with the national and the past with the present. It did this by drawing on family epics and sagas and presumed generically related religious and mythological traditions, thus providing an emotive picture of the world that put followers in touch with their national heritage while pointing them to a new future that was significantly different from Christianity.⁷ Not only was Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century* widely read and even more widely discussed (Poewe 2006), but so also was the magical modernism of writers like Thea von Harbou or film artists like Leni von Riefenstahl (Griffin 2007).

VÖLKISH MODERNISM

In Germany after 1918, aching from defeat, hunger and hopelessness (Vincent 1985), the aim of this alternative religiosity was to bring about a radical rebirth of the nation and a new heroic man (Drucker 1939, pp. 190–5). Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that völkisch modernism is a direct outgrowth of the experiences of front soldiers (the front generation) and, more importantly, of the war youths generation (born between 1900 and 1910) who were disinherited, suffered continuous hunger and deprivation, who became hard, sober, had tenacious willpower and control over combat methods and weapons in the struggle for daily existence, worth and success (Herbert 1996, p. 44).⁸ As Werner Best, the SS-Colonel-General and civilian administrator of France and Denmark, said, 'Volk, nation, and evil enemy were already the most active factors in

our harmless childhood world' (quoted in Herbert 1996, p. 43). As an adult he became part of the *völkisch* milieu, a member of Hauer's German Faith Movement and Himmler's SS: all three 'deviant items in relation to the dominant cultural orthodoxies' (Campbell 2002, p. 14).

THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST WORLDVIEW AND FASCISM

National Socialism was promoted as a *Weltanschauung*, or worldview, by its theorists in contrast to a philosophy, or ideology, which they saw as purely intellectual. As such National Socialism was believed to embrace the whole of life. The worldview of National Socialism that underpinned the Nazi Party and its view of a *völkisch* State was thoroughly Fascist (Griffin 2007). Fascism is defined as a religious form of political behaviour whose leaders and followers are preoccupied with community decline, humiliation or victimhood for which the cure was to be national rebirth (Gentile 1996, 2000, 2006; Payne 1995, 2002).

Consequently, Fascists profess a 'totalitarian vocation of a nascent *political religion*' that they were determined to turn into a new, integralist and pure nation (Gentile 1996, p. 31). German fascism which, as Gentile observed (*ibid*), was 'really a new religion', ambiguously mixed 'symbols of nation' evoked ancient Germanic myths and sagas in the context of 'myths of modern racist paganism, which challenged the Christian churches' (Gentile 2006, p. xviii). Democratic liberties were abandoned while professed National Socialists, freed of the Jewish-Christian dictatorship of morality and law, pursued with redemptive violence goals of internal cleansing and external expansion (Poewe 2006, pp. 5–8 and 24–5).⁹

ECLECTIC THINKING

National Socialism was eclectic; it borrowed ideas from various traditions including theosophy, esotericism, Germanic myths and sagas, Hinduism and Social Darwinism (Hesemann 2004, p. 19). Thus, Hitler, his 'neopagan NSDAP-chief-ideologue' Rosenberg, his later deputy Heß, and *Reichsführer* SS Himmler were particularly interested in Indian philosophy and spirituality (Hesemann 2004, pp. 183, 260). Himmler pursued his interests in Hinduism by forging links through Tübingen Religious Studies professor Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, one of the more 'sophisticated' *völkisch* thinkers, and Walter Wüst to the *Bünde* (youth groups) and academia. Even Islam and Japanese Shintoism interested Hitler because, in his view, they cultivated heroism and accorded well with Social Darwinism that the Nazis used to justify sloughing off the weak (Hesemann 2004, p. 359). Importantly, the power elite of the Third Reich including Eckart, Rosenberg, Goebbels, Heß and Himmler had two other things in common: first, the abandonment of Christianity in their childhood, youth or early twenties and second, the construction of their political speeches from

völkisch literature (Bärsch 1995; Herbert 1996; Reuth 2000; Piper 2005; Longerich 2008).¹⁰

Völkisch Groups and the Völkisch Milieu

IDEAS AND MOTIVATIONS

Since the ideas and new morality of the new Germanic religions, especially Jakob Wilhelm Hauer's *German Faith Movement*, Mathilde Ludendorff's *God-Knowledge*, Adolf Bartels' *völkisch German-Christianity* and Hans Grimm's *Poetic Nationalism*, among many others, are described in the recent books of Baumann (2005), Puschner (2003), Puschner, Schmitz and Ulbricht (1999), and Poewe (2006), only a brief description needs be given here. The key motivation of all these cultic religions within the völkisch milieu¹¹ was to free Germany of the 'yoke' of the Judeo-Christian tradition and of any Western form of representative democracy that they saw as benefiting a few of whom they were not a part. It handed fascism its 'enemy' and a vision of a holy new society consisting of hardened human beings with a firm German identity that encouraged hubris. (For persistence of these ideas in the New Right see Wolin 2004, p. 139).

THE GERMAN FAITH MOVEMENT

Hauer's German Faith sat on two legs, that of Hinduism, especially the Bhagavad-Gita and Yoga, and that of Germanic thought, especially the Edda, Eckhart and the writings of any 'heretical' German philosophical and literary figure, including German Idealists (Baumann 2005, pp. 134, 218 and 253; Poewe 2006, p. 84). Hauer postulated a culture-clash between West-Indo-Germanic thought pattern (*westindogermanisches Denken*) and Christianity. Although differently worded, this culture clash still plays a role in the New Right today (Woods 2007). Thus, Sigrid Hunke (1913–1999), following Hauer and Mathilde Ludendorff (1877–1966), writes about a clash between European thought patterns (*europäisches Denken*) and Christianity (Hunke 1969, 1982, 1987, 1989, 1997, n.d.; Krebs, 1981, p. 28). In short, coming out of Gnosticism, being carried forward by medieval heretics and, later, Old Testament-rejecting liberal theologians like Adolf von Harnack, those who would usher in fascism had to usher out Judeo-Christianity. This was keenly understood by the Lutheran theologian Walter Künneth who recognized in the writings of Rosenberg the regime's intention 'to finish the church, by any means' (Künneth 1937, p. 5).

THE LUDENDORFF MOVEMENT: GERMAN BELIEF

Mathilde Ludendorff who had a PhD in neurology created a no-nonsense, bare reality religion that rooted her followers, whose identity and sense of

belonging was badly shaken by military, political and economic defeat, in their Volk towards whom they were responsible, for whom they died and from whom came their salvation. While the individual must die, so Mathilde, the Volk is eternal (Ludendorff 1935, p. 33; see also Kneller, 1941, pp. 56, 57 and Poewe 2006, pp. 163–4).

Having firmly rooted her followers in their Volk, Ludendorff strips their identification with the Judeo-Christian tradition:

The imperialistic hegemonic goals of Jewish confessions (Mosaism, Moham-medanism, and Christianity) are a consequence of their belief in the exclusive immortality of the 'chosen Volk', while all other peoples are subject to exter-mination. (1935, p. 33)

In other words, in this twisted logic, it is not German fascism that exter-minates; rather, Germans must fear cultural genocide from Jewish confessions.

VÖLKISCH NOVELISTS AND WRITERS

Dozens of best selling völkisch writers also influenced Germany's youths in the interwar years (Poewe 2006, p. 147). Two of them had a considerable following. They were Adolf Bartels (1862–1945) and Hans Grimm (1875–1959). Bartels was a writer of völkisch literature who never finished his PhD but was appointed by the Nazi *Minister of the Interior* Wilhelm Frick to teach at the University of Jena anyway. Later he also became a member of the *Institute for the Research and Eradication of Jewish influence on German Church Life* in Eisenach (cf. Heschel 2008). Influenced by völkisch nationalists like Fichte and worried about interwar decadence, Bartels advocated an organically grown völkisch rebirth. He was active in numerous völkisch Bünde and publishing firms. Important here is the fact that Bartels, though religiously völkisch, became the co-founder of the *Bund for German Christianity* and saw National Socialism as Germany's salvation. Along with Joachim Kurd Niedlich (1884–1928), founder of the *Bund für Deutsch-Kirche*, they were the earliest predecessors of the *German Christians* that will be discussed in the next section. Their program for German Christianity involved removing Judaic elements of Christianity by way of völkisch interpretations of Bible and dogma. The aim was to accommodate Christianity to the völkisch-antisemitic ideology popular at the time and thereby make it a political force (Meier 1982, p. 23, Rösner 1999, p. 881). Like Ludwig Müller who later became Hitler's *Reichsbishop*, Bartels joined the Nazi Party early and after 1933 wrote his books as a National Socialist (Schneider 1993, p. 273).

For Hans Grimm salvation was the 'Third Reich'. Following his deceased friend Moeller van den Bruck, by 'Third Reich' Grimm meant to express the religious hope of salvation from the grinding needs of Germans during the Versailles era – an era that robbed young Germans, especially of the hope of developing their talents freely anywhere in the

world. Closed off from the world, German salvation was to come, therefore, not from a Christian God but from the 'fount of the power within the *Volk*' (1980 reprint of 1931 speech, p. 11; also Reuth 2000, p. 57). That is what 'Third Reich' meant – a fount of power expressed by its best poets.¹²

ORGANIZATIONS, NUMBERS AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NETWORKS

Most scholars looking at the *völkisch* movement fail to list its constituent groups. There were not merely too many of them and many very small ones. There were also too many kinds of them. The groups ranged from solitary literary fighters and their reading circles, to publishing firms, religious orders, unions, alliances and political parties. Instead, scholars tend to list four major *völkisch* tendencies that came together within the National Socialist world view. These tendencies included the following: (i) strengthening German identity (*Volkstum*) culturally and biologically; (ii) breaking the Judeo-Christian identity by stoking up Antisemitism that saw Jews as political adversaries and religious-cum-financial imperialists; (iii) reforming life by overcoming the dis-eases of civilization; and (iv) saving the Nordic culture of the otherwise racially mixed German people by means of positive eugenics (Hartung 1999, pp. 32–7; Rennstich 1992).

Within this *völkisch* milieu, there were many groups in which all of these tendencies were represented and for whom politics and religion were inseparable. Because these groups were the places where, as Roger Griffin (2007, pp. 2 and 8) argues, palingenetic stories (stories of national rebirth) were spun between 1920 and 1933, it is essential to take the sheer numbers and diversity of such groups into account when discussing the origins of National Socialism. There was first of all the German Faith Movement. Because it was also an audience cult, it had an outreach far beyond its formal number of between 39,500 members and 2.5 million followers at its peak depending on whom one believes.¹³ As an audience cult its propaganda reached an estimated 10–12 million before 1935 (Bartsch 1938).

Then there was the Deutsche Freischar with an estimated 12,000 members, the Free Religious with 70,000 followers, the Ludendorffers with 500,000, the German Christians with 600,000, numerous Reading Circles with 100,000s, the SA with 427,000, Stahlhelm (paramilitary) over 500,000, Freikorps (paramilitary) 80,000 and Jungdeutscher Orden 400,000. I have no figures for, but include, The University-Ring-Movement (*Die Hochschulring-Bewegung*), Hans Grimm's poetic conferences (*Dichtertagungen*), The All-German Association (*Alldeutschen Verband*), the German People's Protection and Defense League (*Deutschen Schutz und Trutz Bund*) (Lohalm 1970), the Bartels-Bund that later fused with the German *Völkisch* Writers Association (Rösner 1999), the Association of Front Soldiers at German Universities and the initially small Hitler Youth.¹⁴

THE NAZI TAKEOVER

Starting in 1933 and continuing until 1936, the bottom up movement was transformed into the top down model that Gentile (2000) describes. Already in 1933 the Party asserted control over the collective. It did so by demanding that all youth groups associated with the hundreds of Bünde, the remaining political parties, the paramilitary organizations, and eventually Protestant and Catholic youth groups be transferred to the Hitler Youth, which was solidly in the hands of the Nazi pedagogue and Head of the Hitler Youth, Baldur von Schirach. In 1936 Hitler Youth membership became mandatory by law which was re-affirmed in 1939. Thus, while the Hitler Youth had a mere 1000 members in 1923 it ended up with 8 million in 1940. As well, by 1936 virtually all the little propheta of the Bünde, reading circles, poetic conventions and culture-struggle groups were removed. Like the radical leaders of the German Christians (Gailus 2001, pp. 421 and 435), who were also disempowered, they were given positions, or created positions for themselves, in Research Institutes that worked with Indo-Germanic, Ancestral Heritage, or Jewish topics.

WEBS OF DECEIT

Recent German historiography is sensitive to the significance of networks and the importance of lower level leadership in the development and perpetuation of German fascism (Herbert 1996; Mallmann & Paul 2004; Piper 2007). It is especially the mediating function of the numerous small group leaders that is important. In the 1920s and 1930s, small group leaders mediated between the rising elite of the Nazi party and the common folk generally. The result was an expansive social web that involved primary group leaders in double and multiple memberships of diverse groups, streams, reading circles and military associations. The theory behind this is that small groups and interlinking social networks are the most effective means of social mobilization and of creating intimacy between leaders and followers. Thus, not every primary leader needs to meet the same elite person, like Hitler, in order to establish the desired intimacy with them (Whyte 1974, pp. 9 and 23; Bromley & Shupe 1979; Barker 1984; Bohannon 1995).

A few examples might help. The nationalist writer Erwin Kolbenheyer personally met Hitler, Goebbels and Heß. Kolbenheyer in turn was a speaker at Hauer's conferences where his anecdotes and first hand information about Hitler, Goebbels and Heß created a sense of intimacy with them (Poewe 2006). In turn Hauer met personally with Heß, Himmler and Heydrich who invited him to join the SS, and with Werner Best who became the equivalent of 'General' for the Reich Security Headquarters (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA) (Herbert 1996).¹⁵ Until Hauer ceased to be useful, this cosiness persuaded even some of Hauer's

students to join these elitist organizations without recognizing that they were lethal (Kwiet 2004; Baumann 2005).

Hauer's co-founder Ernst Graf zu Reventlow knew Hitler personally. He also worked with Hans Severus Ziegler an early member of the NSDAP and co-worker of Artur Dinter and Fritz Sauckel who together built up the party in Thüringen after 1924. Though Dinter, a rabid anti-Semite, was the founder of a political party (the German Völkisch Freedom Party) in 1922, he founded the German People's Church (Deutsche Volkskirche) in 1927. Let these examples suffice. But note, like a spider's web the connections reached everyone associated with youths, academia, business, the Wehrmacht and the Church.¹⁶

All of the above leaders propagated in some form or other the völkisch-organic worldview that was the core of National Socialism even after 1945 (Leggewie 1998). These intellectuals and writers, all of them with university degrees, sat on one another's boards, spoke at major rallies across Germany, organized uncountable reading circles, published numerous brochures, newsletters and books, were linked with militias, youth groups, culture conflict societies, publishers, and with leaders up and down the Nazi party hierarchy and the SS (cf. Campbell 2002, p. 15). Together they constituted a milieu within which it was natural to think in völkisch-political categories that became the fascist mentality. In the end and to no one's surprise, students flocked to Hitler's Party. Why? Because there they found the völkisch, national, social and revolutionary ideas combined and more, they found the bridge from playing with worldview ideas to practical politics.

German Christians: The Expansion of Völkisch Ideas into Christianity

GERMAN CHRISTIANS

German Christians were different things to different people, including themselves. Thus Karl Löwith, who experienced their growth as an ethnic Jew, wrote that the German Christians were 'a neo-pagan anti-Church movement' (1994, p. 5). Likewise Müller-Schwefe (1983, p. 129) points out that the majority of people in the church were decisively opposed to the neo-paganism of National Socialists and the German Christians. Somewhat differently, the historian Manfred Gailus (2001) sees them as a Christian-National socialist syncretism where syncretization counteracts the fragmentary tendencies present in such a fusion within the overall völkisch Protestant milieu (cf. Campbell 2002, p. 15). Finally, to members of the *Confessing Church* who were in the words of Weinrich about Karl Barth, 'modestly uncompromising' (2003, p. 135), German Christians were heretics who were intent on re-shaping Christianity in the new light of popular völkisch ideas (Kunst 1983: 34; Bergen 1996). It took leaders of the Confessing Church a long time to understand that German

Christians were Hitler's instrument to make his rabid antisemitism acceptable among Protestants and thus expand his power base (ibid).

THE GERMAN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Recent biographies of German Christian leaders show that they were religiously and politically highly unstable individuals who found their identity by travelling rapidly through a wide variety of *völkisch* groups and right wing political parties (cf. Campbell 2002, p. 15). Being highly politicized, they recognized that antisemitism was a magical weapon of National Socialism (Gailus 2001, p. 257).

The origins of the German Christian movement began before World War I when students inspired by nationalism flocked to various *völkisch* German Student Associations (*völkische Vereine deutscher Studenten*). Within these associations, they agitated against Jewish influence in German cultural life because, to their chauvinistic thinking, it hindered national development. These students were monarchists, for 'secular' Christian values, a unified Germany and the cultivation of *Deutschtum* (Germanness).

While Christianity was held up as a cultural value, it was actually neglected as a living reality. What mattered was a secular, pliable, politicized Christianity, in short, a Christian mentality (*Gesinnung*) shaped by German nationalism. Significantly, Ludwig Müller (1883–1945), who later became Hitler's German Christian Reichsbishop and his colleagues Wilhelm Kube (1887–1943) and Joachim Hossenfelder (1899–1976), three key figures in founding and promoting the German Christian Movement, all developed their worldview syncretisms within these *völkisch* student movements.

Otto Dibelius (1880–1967), later a Bishop and outspoken critic of National Socialism, was also in the *völkisch* German Student Association (Schneider 1993, pp. 33 and 34). His involvement with *völkisch* movements goes a long way to explain his early enthusiasm for what he saw as the social stability that he believed Hitler represented. While he may have been a *völkisch* anti-Semite as student, he was not at home in the *völkisch* milieu, remained part of the dominant cultural orthodoxy, and joined the Confessing Church to protest state tyranny (Schneider 1993).

According to Gailus (2001, pp. 424 and 477), these people were individuals with a double-faith within a Protestant milieu. They therefore represented a smooth co-existence between a Christian-Protestant mentality and the National Socialist world picture. But other biographical studies do not support his argument (Schneider 1993). The first three became ardent National Socialists who wanted Hitler's national church without a bible.¹⁷ The last mentioned found his way to a solid church position separate from, and in opposition to, the Nazi state.¹⁸

Koschorke (1976) presents another way of looking at the question of a stable Protestant-National Socialist syncretism (cf. Schwarzmüller 2007). The autobiographical sketches in Koschorke's book show that the pressure

to syncretize counteracted the 'fragmentary tendencies present in the milieu because of the enormous diversity of cultural items' that had to be 'continually mutated' (Campbell 2002, p. 15). These syncretisms are short lived and unstable episodes in the lives of the *völkisch*. For example, a sincere Christian, inspired by *völkisch* nationalism, joins the German Christians and Nazi Party. Inevitably he will voice objections to Nazi actions only to be pulled before a district court and expelled from the Party. The judgement of dismissal will have made it clear that 'A Christian cannot be a National Socialist; Christianity and National Socialism exclude each other' (Koschorke 1976, pp. 450–458, 458).

THE KEY FIGURE OF LUDWIG KLAGGES

Germann's recent biography (1995) of the German Christian leader Dietrich Klagges (1891–1971) is highly instructive. Klagges was the son of a forester who became a public school teacher of botany, zoology, mineralogy, physics, chemistry and sport. He fought on the Western Front during the First World War, was wounded, and received the *Kriegsverdienstkreuz* (Distinguished Service Cross). After 1918, in utter despair about the German situation, Klagges circulated among *völkisch* groups where he developed strong political interests. During this time, he wrote numerous articles about political-religious themes for *völkisch*-nationalistic news journals. Then, after joining several political parties, he settled for the NSDAP in 1924. In 1925, the year of the publication of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Klagges published his religious-political convictions in a book entitled *Das Urevangelium Jesu, der deutsche Glaube* (The Original Gospel of Jesus: The German Faith). In it he revealed himself as a religious freethinker with highly political *völkisch*-nationalist ideas.

Significantly, he argued that the church and scripture had lost all authority and ceased to be the pillars of Protestantism (Klagges 1926, p. 5). Therefore, it was the task of 'our time' to define a new religious foundation and create a new German faith to resolve political problems (Klagges 1926, pp. 5–6). This new foundation was to be found in the *völkisch* milieu which filled with holy fire those who were held in its grasp (Klagges 1926, p. 6; also Böhm 2008, pp. 56–7). It prepared the soil for religious renewal by a second, more radical Luther (Klagges 1926, p. 7), or rather an unLuther who would remove not only church-Christianity but also the Jewish God whose scripted Jewish law only brought men to their knees when what was needed was men who stood up (Klagges 1926, pp. 18 and 9).¹⁹

THE ANTISEMITISM OF KLAGGES

In light of the argument that the antisemitism of Christianity was ultimately responsible for the Holocaust (Germann 1995, p. 51; Goldhagen 2002;

Steigmann-Gall 2003), it is interesting to note that Klagges derives his 'Anti-Semitic' notions of God, of good and evil, and of the battle between them from the *Edda*,²⁰ and from *völkisch* thought generally, *not* from the Bible (Klagges 1926, p. 13). To state it differently, if Klagges' biographer Germann is right 'that the Holocaust, the killing of European Jews, is the bitter and shocking consequence of the actualization of Klagges' writing' (1995, p. 103),²¹ then the realization and justification of these consequences comes from the *Edda* and *völkisch* thinking, *not* Christianity. And I say this even though in the construction of his political religion, Klagges tries to retain wildly distorted Christian elements from the Gospel of Mark. At any rate, for those who needed an enemy to explain Germany's sorry state, Klagges' book defines that enemy as the 'Jew'.

In short, Klagges' new religion with its clearly identifiable German Christian followers is a synthesis of broadly *völkisch* ideas, Indo-Germanic, or rather Persian and Hindu ones, and the *völkisch*ly modified Gospel of Mark. Rather than being a double faith or Protestant-National Socialist syncretism (Gailus 2001), Klagges' German Christianity sits on 'assumptions that are contrary to the primary premises of Judeo-Christian religion and have been rejected by that tradition as heresies' (Campbell 2002, p. 16). In short, German Christianity too is at home in the cultic, that is *völkisch*, milieu where Hinduism and pre-Christian pagan traditions are 'almost hallmarks' by which cultic religious groups identify themselves (*ibid*).

WORKING GROUPS

The ideas of Klagges, Kube, Ziegler, among many others, fell on fertile ground. In the 1920s and early 1930s, parallel to the *Bünde* of the *völkisch* movement, there were also *Bünde* within the church. In 1931, they were bound closer to the Party. Later, Gregor Straßer, National Organisation Head of the Nazi Party, prepared a list of National Socialist Pastors for the upcoming church elections. These pastors were soon led by Joachim Hossenfelder, 'in origin and destiny... a typical representative of his generation' (Scholder 1988, p. 204; cf. Gailus 2001, pp. 417–21). Like Klagges, he volunteered in 1917 and went to the front immediately. After the war, he joined various *völkisch* organizations and the Party and acted in the church with 'an unshakable conviction that with Hitler the German Christians would be victorious' (Scholder 1988, p. 205). Contributing to the exaggerated emphasis on creation order that suddenly became popular in Lutheran theology of the 1930s, Hossenfelder argued that God let Volk happen through Hitler, this Volk is Race, meaning 'God wants Race' and people's loyalty to it (Gailus 2001, pp. 418–9). It is this man who prepared the church elections for 13 November 1932 in which the Deutsche-Christen won a significant number of the seats. It split the church. The 10 points program that Hossenfelder prepared were fused religious-political statements that mirrored the direct influence of the

Party (Germann 1995, p. 72). These fused religious-political statements became known as 'positive Christianity'.

Since Klagges knew Hitler personally, and since Hitler – according to Klagges – agreed with Klagges' religious conceptions (Germann 1995, p. 107), Hitler, and for that matter Goebbels and even Himmler, could and did opportunistically pretend to support 'positive Christianity', would even pay their church taxes, without being Christians. The crimes Hitler and his cohorts committed, however, they committed on the basis of a *völkisch* penetrated National Socialism coupled with the *völkisch* penetrated SS and Gestapo, not on that of Christianity and its deemed Christian Antisemitism. Importantly, the crimes took place primarily within the *völkisch* reorganized East (Longerich 1008, pp. 453–484).

THE CATHOLIC COUNTER-EXAMPLE

Was there this kind of *völkisch* penetration in the Catholic Church? And was the persecution of Jews by the Nazis and in Europe the consequence of Christian Antisemitism? A book that gives penetrating insights into the Catholic situation during the Nazi era is Georg Denzler's *Widerstand ist nicht das richtige Wort: Katholische Priester, Bischöfe und Theologen im Dritten Reich* (Resistance is not the right word: Catholic priests, bishops, and theologians during the Third Reich) (2003).²²

Denzler describes eight biographies of Catholic priests of which some decidedly resisted National Socialism and lost their lives for it, while others became ardent followers. Since space does not permit a description of their individual lives, I shall venture a generalization. Those who fell for National Socialism were invariably grasped by *völkisch* thought. Consequently, they were Antisemitic in the political and racist sense. They were for war and the empire; one joined the SS, became deadly anti-Catholic and spied on fellow Catholics, even delivering them to their death. By contrast, those who resisted National Socialism recognized that *völkisch* thinking was incompatible with Christianity. They were Christ centred, had a strong sense of the separation of Church and State, worked indefatigably for peace, helped uncountable Jews escape and maintained a sense of equanimity about Communists who like them worked against the regime. Several of these priests, especially Jesuits, were important liaisons between the military resistance and churches and governments outside of Germany (Denzler 2003, pp. 111–208).

HAUENSTEIN — A CASE STUDY

Empirical support for this position is found in Schwarzmüller's (2007) study of the Catholic village of Hauenstein. While the first village in Germany that voted one hundred per cent for the Hitler movement was Darstein, the neighbouring community Hauenstein voted almost totally

(92.6%), even in the 1933 election, for the *Zentrum* and *Bavarian People's Party*. Furthermore, throughout the Nazi years, Hauenstein resisted what they called 'the Hitlers' and paid a high price for it. Schwarzmüller (2007, p. 75) explains how the Catholic milieu, consisting as it did of a common faith and an intensive network of Catholic associations and societies that accompanied an individual from birth to death, created a stable base that the Nazis and their henchmen the German Christians could not penetrate, even after the *Zentrum Party* was destroyed. The priest, so Schwarzmüller, functioned as a kind of milieu manager (Schwarzmüller 2007, pp. 36–9).

By contrast, Darstein had no church, no religious group structure, no cleric and no common faith. Furthermore, opposed to Catholicism, many a Protestant theologian in the area hoped that the 'national movement' would break the power of political Catholicism (Schwarzmüller 2007, p. 47). Schwarzmüller quotes a Protestant theologian and church historian as saying in the Pfalz (the area surrounding Darstein) the NSDAP was 'the typical protestant milieu party' (Schwarzmüller 2007, p. 154).

In short, Catholics who were a confessional minority (21 million or about one-third of the German population) did not, on the whole, support the Hitler movement (Schwarzmüller 2007, p. 154). As one of the Catholic women said, 'we are Catholics, we don't need a new religion' (Schwarzmüller 2007, p. 153).

Conclusion

The thesis of this paper is that for the time period between 1919 and 1933 the *völkisch* milieu was the breeding ground for German fascism. While the Nazis saw all socio-political life in flux and therefore talked about *völkisch* movements, referring to it as a milieu, indeed a cultic milieu, and recognizing the modernist aspect of it is more appropriate.

The common faith of the *völkisch* milieu consisted of a shared vocabulary that was anything but Christian (cf. Gailus 2001, p. 430). There were mythic national and racial categories and the myths of degeneration, decadence and rebirth. There were Germanic pagan categories garnered from epics, sagas, mythos and descent peopled by heroes and holy warriors. There was the 'other religion' consisting of a line of heretics from Eckhart to Nietzsche. There were the mystical powers of providence, destiny, faith, tragedy and organic growth.

While the *völkisch* German Christian part movement (Puschner 2003, p. 104) extended its activities within the halls of Christian churches, its ideas if not its clerics who propagated them had their source in the *völkisch* milieu. Gailus (2001, p. 415) does bring out, however, that in Berlin, 224 of 509 evangelical clerics (44%) belonged temporarily or for the duration of the Nazi period to the German Christians. Of these some of the younger ones seem to have joined the harder National Socialist

milieu directly, almost by way of a conversion (p. 423). But even when that was the case, as with Siegfried Nobiling, he demanded that the young generation of theology students be educated in the spirit of the *völkisch* faith community (p. 426).

Where German Christians are concerned the church historian Böhm's (2008, p. 56) characterization of them is most accurate. They were people who held *völkisch*-religious ideas. More importantly, they combined cultural pessimism and negative preconceptions about civilization with an interest in old Germanic culture and religion and, given their nationalistic motivation, turned this combination into a method with which to strip all Oriental (Jewish) and Roman influences from Christianity thus turning it into a specifically German Faith ('*arteigenen Glauben*').

The many definitions at the beginning of the paper are there primarily to demystify the religiosity of the German *völkisch* milieu. The content of its religiosity, specifically its obsession with nation, Volk, Volkstum, and race on the one hand, and with destiny and determination on the other, was specific to the post-World War I situation. At that time, Germans perceived themselves abandoned and mistreated by the international community. Not surprisingly, if unfortunately, they fell back upon their own popular culture to create a *völkisch* milieu in order to oust Weimar and orthodox Christianity. When the Nazi Party took control of that milieu after 1933, its leaders built up an organizational structure in which denunciations, violence, brutality, and finally terror, became commonplace. The final result was not national rebirth but genocide.

Short Biography

Irving Hexham's research focuses on new religions movements and the relationship between religion, politics and society. He has published 23 books including *The Irony of Apartheid* (Toronto 1981) and *New Religions as Global Cultures* (Boulder 1997) with Karla Poewe. His articles are to be found in various journals including *African Affairs*, the *Journal of Southern African History*, *Religious Studies Review*, *Religion*, *Studies in Religion* and *The Journal of Contemporary History*. He was awarded a festschrift *Border Crossings: Explorations of an Interdisciplinary Historian* (Stuttgart), eds. Ulrich van der Heyden and Andreas Feldtkeller in 2008. Currently, he is Professor of Religions Studies at the University of Calgary. He holds a BA (Hons) Religious Studies, from Lancaster University and an MA (with commendation) Religious Studies, and a PhD, History, from Bristol University.

Karla Poewe's research is located at the intersection of anthropology, history, religion, literature and theology. She has authored or co-authored papers in these areas for *American Ethnologist*, *American Anthropologist*, *Dialectical Anthropology*, *Africa*, *African Studies Review*, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, *Literature and Theology*, *Cultural Dynamics*, *Ethnos*, *Nova*

Religio, Journal of Contemporary Religion, the South African Historical Journal, and three encyclopedia. Her book *New Religions and the Nazis* (Routledge 2006) argues that for the time period between 1919 and 1933 the *völkisch* milieu was the breeding ground for German fascism. Always interested in the problem of surviving extreme conditions, increasingly ones caused by the complex dynamics of wars, her most recent research is centered on the integration of German refugees from the East into the occupied zones and the two Germanies after World War II. Poewe gave papers at the Dag Hammarskjöld Centre, the University of London, The Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard, the University of Leipzig, the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz and the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies, Berlin. She conducted fieldwork in Zambia (1973–1975); Namibia (1981–1983); South Africa (1987–1991); and did archival research and interviews in Germany since 1994. Poewe is professor of anthropology at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. She received her PhD from the University of New Mexico (1976). Poewe studied Bemba at the University of Wisconsin (1972); Swahili at the University of Calgary (1971); and worked with Africanists T. O. Beidelman and John Middleton at New York University (1969).

Notes

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¹ For a discussion of resource mobilization theory, see Bromley and Shupe (1979 pp. 19–26).

² A *völkisch* worldview puts priority on group and personality above the individual and individualism. Analogous to an individual, the group is a biological entity made up of a distinct racial, cultural and intellectual substance. *Völkisch* writers translated this predilection into a very specific notion of nation. To them, a *völkisch* nation is made up of a *Völksgemeinschaft* (a community of one people), a worldview-oriented police with law based on provisional measures, and the fusion of politics and religion.

³ According to Cattaruzza (2004, pp. 2–3), Gentile also noted a relationship between medieval heretics and ‘modern heretics’, the latter consisting of small but influential heretics in Italy who were seeking a ‘symbiosis of religion and politics’ around the time of WWI. Apparently, ‘Gentile’s research did not actually regard fascism as such, but the new generation of rebellious Italian intellectuals who were active at the beginning of the twentieth century in challenging the liberal state, and spreading the word of nationalism as the “religion of citizens”’ (2004, p. 3). It is from these phenomena that Gentile reconstructed fascist ideology.

⁴ For example, partially developing his religion from the Bhagavad-Gita, Hauer argues as follows. If civil war is a dispensation of providence from which there can be no escape, then questions about cause and prevention of it are irrelevant. The warrior is left with but one choice, what attitude to take toward that which he is destined to do, and in doing it, he is left with the tragic certainty that by doing his duty he will also incur guilt. As Hauer says quoting from the XVIII. Chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita: ‘Everything done by the human being is afflicted with guilt (*sadosha*), like fire with smoke’ (Hauer 1934, p. 15).

⁵ By faith, so Hitler, ‘I understand the intercession of the whole person’ (in Bucher 2008, p. 104). It could also mean ‘risking the whole person.’ Hitler used the word ‘einsetzen’. According to Hitler, Providence determines, legitimizes or mobilizes according to functional need (2008, p. 85).

⁶ Künne (1947, pp. 119, 120) points out that Hitler’s new religion sits on the biological ideology of Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as Chamberlain. Consequently, he calls it a

Religion of Blood. Importantly, while Hitler uses Christian terms like, the Will of the Lord, the Word of the Lord, eternal Providence, Creator, and the Almighty, he fills these words with new content. Thus, creator means eternal nature; Almighty and Providence means lawfulness of life; Will of the Lord means the duty of human beings to submit to the demands of race (p. 120). For Hitler biology decides (Künne 1947, p. 120).

⁷ Germanic heroic sagas, which Hauer also worked into his religion, described these tragedies and pointed to a new morality, one that took the assenter beyond good and evil. These sagas, as well as such Indo-Aryan religions as Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, were elements of most of the new religions of the *völkisch* milieu. The exception is the 'naked reality' religion of Mathilde Ludendorff. To her and her husband, Erich Ludendorff, religion had to be specific to a Volk (people), unite that Volk, give it a strong national identity, and talk about final things.

⁸ Sceptical readers should remember not only the Treaty of Versailles but also the hunger blockade imposed on Germany after the end of the war by the victors.

⁹ See also Griffin (2007, pp. 181–2).

¹⁰ Here the uses of good biographies are especially helpful. The historian Longerich (2008), for example, reviewed carefully what Himmler read and how that material found its way into his talks given at political rallies.

¹¹ The concept 'milieu' is used to replace 'movement', even though movement (*Bewegung*) was favoured by the Nazi *Tat* (action, deed, movement) orientation. Milieu refers to the network, groups, faiths and categories of (*völkisch*) thought that were common in the 1920s and 1930s.

¹² The nineteenth century religious radical David Friedrich Strauss made the same argument in his *Der alte und der neue Glaube: Ein Bekenntnis* (The Old and the New Faith: A Confession) in 1872.

¹³ Membership changed rapidly and numbers are rarely accurate or made public. According to Bartsch (1938), attendances at meetings held by the numerous speakers of the German Faith Movement were counted to give an estimation of followers as were subscribers to the various German Faith journals. Baumann (2005, p. 63) follows a scholar who estimated 100,000 members.

¹⁴ For an overview of a large number of other groups belonging to the *völkisch* movement, see Bartsch (1938), Lohalm (1970), Luthhöft (1971), Puschner, Schmitz, and Ulbricht (1999), and Poewe (2006).

¹⁵ Intimacy with those who had power over life and death had consequences. Hauer's student, secretary and organizer, Paul Zapp (b.1904) joined Hauer's Bund when he was 17 years old. In 1970 Zapp received lifelong imprisonment for the murder of at least 13,499 people as leader of the Sonderkommando 11a and the Einsatzgruppe D. Not surprisingly, he justified his deed in terms of Hauer's and the SD's religious world-view (Kwiet 2004, pp. 257–258, 259).

¹⁶ With respect to the latter, Reventlow and Hauer cultivated connections with such radical German Christians as Dr. Reinhold Krause and Dr. Karl Steger (Poewe 2006, p. 117; Jantzen 2008, pp. 99, 186).

¹⁷ According to Dibelius, Müller had 'absolutely no Christian or theological formation' (1964, p. 141). This applies to most if not all German Christians (Gailus 2001, p. 477). Thus, Kube wanted a race specific Christ-faith, heroic piety, as well as the subordination of one's confession under race ideology (Meindl 2007:140). There is no trace of Christianity except for the speech sound.

¹⁸ Space does not allow a discussion of the controversies surrounding Dibelius.

¹⁹ Klagges talks about enslavement.

²⁰ The ancient Edda texts are 'significant documentations of the pre-Christian, pan-Germanic culture, religions and its mythology'. Klagges' notion of Allfather, his depiction of creation, his emphasis on will in times of war, and his emphasis on moral dualism are taken directly from the Edda. He is even correct in describing this moral dualism as 'dissimilar to Christian, Jewish, and Islamic (Abrahamic) religion in that there is not a singular holy authority and a negative equivalent as the devil. It is more similar to the Zoroastrian religion and its dualism in pre-Islamic Iran dating before the foundation of Jewish monotheism' (<http://www.euroheritage.net/eddaintro.shtml>: 1, 4).

²¹ Germann contradicts himself. On the one hand he asserts, 'When Klagges sees the Jews as the embodiment of evil, then he (Klagges) takes hold of Christian ideas . . . for already in the

New Testament the Evangelist John reports about the Jews: "the devil is your father" . . . (1995, p. 51). But Klagges does not refer to the New Testament. On the other, Germann writes correctly that (Klagges claims that) Jesus found the courage to listen to the 'voice of his Aryan soul' and from that source inflamed his people with the message of their 'divine sonship' (*Gotteskindschaft*) (1995, p. 55).

²² There were certain Catholic theologians (the most famous ones being Karl Adam, 1876–1966, Michael Schmaus, 1897–1994, Joseph Lortz, 1887–1975, and Anton Stonner, 1895–1973), a few bishops and some priests who became enthusiastic völkisch thinkers.

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